

## Editorial: Adult education and the community

*Danny Wildemeersch*

Leuven University, Belgium ([danny.wildemeersch@ped.kuleuven.be](mailto:danny.wildemeersch@ped.kuleuven.be))

*Ewa Kurantowicz*

University of Lower Silesia, Poland ([ewa.kurantowicz@wp.pl](mailto:ewa.kurantowicz@wp.pl))

In the past decade, the issue of *community* has become an important social and even political theme. Researchers and politicians share a concern about an observed loss of social cohesion. In the field of social sciences, the American political scientist, Robert Putnam achieved worldwide fame with his book 'Bowling Alone. The collapse and revival of American community' (2000), which convinced many readers that our sense of community is being eroded. Putnam argues that over the past few decades, associational life in the US has steadily lost ground. He argues that people no longer are committed to matters beyond their private interests, that they spend lonely hours in front of the television, and that they are largely self-absorbed. Traditional membership of various associations, such as sports clubs, parent committees, service clubs, and youth organizations, used to ensure that people felt involved in the local community and, by extension, in society at large. The steady decline in civic engagement causes the social fabric to unravel and trust in society to decline, thus Putnam claims. Such trust can only develop when people are connected, when they maintain regular contacts, and collaborate with each other. This does not only involve ties with like-minded people (bonding), but also the collaboration with people and associations outside one's circle of confidants (bridging). The trust emerging from these processes of bonding and bridging represents a society's 'social capital' (Field, 2003), 'the glue that holds society together' (Putnam, 2000).

Many authors dealing with the issue of *social capital* are rather pessimistic about present-day social developments and call for a renewal of the social fabric, often by looking back to (alleged) forms of association in the past. This position is shared by many European scholars who also consider processes of individualisation as one of the main causes of what they consider the breakdown of the social fabric. More recently this analysis is being complemented by a critical analysis of the challenges posed by multicultural society. The last decades have shown an increasing ethnic-cultural mix in European societies that often were considered to be fairly homogeneous. In this context, policymakers are said to have shown little concern, thereby ignoring that large groups of newcomers hardly develop ties with 'the country of arrival', do not understand its language or culture and sometimes even take a hostile attitude towards the host country and its cultural traditions. 'The non-committal answer given by multiculturalism is that there is no 'we' anymore; instead, society consists of a collection of subcultures. It is hard to see what remains of the notion of citizenship. Without a sense of 'we' nothing is

possible, without critical involvement, society disintegrates' (Scheffer, 2007, p. 405, translation DW).

The discourse on the restoration of the community is today fairly popular and dominant among policy makers. France has installed a minister dealing with issues of French identity. British politicians of the larger political parties explore the way Britishness can again play a role in dealing with diversity. The German chancellor declares multicultural society a failure. British and French leaders confirm this statement. Populist politicians are increasingly influential in many European countries. They reflect a major concern in a cohesive society that produces the social capital necessary to forge 'a community *with* an identity'. It tells 'a story of lost paradise and promised redemption' (Arneil, 2006, p. 201). In opposition to this position, some scholars argue that it is not possible today, and it never has been possible in the past, to overcome differences in society and to forge a common 'we'. There are inevitably all kinds of differences, oppositions and antagonisms which cannot, will not, and even should not be overcome (Mouffe, 2005). Difference and plurality is the basis of our present day society and the backbone of our democracy. Taking into account this inevitable difference, the idea of 'a community without a community' (Amin, 2005) or of 'a community of those who have nothing in common' (Lingis, 1994) may be much more relevant than a community that in vain tries to (re-)establish strong identification and bonding.

Beneath the rational community, its common discourse of which each lucid mind is but the representative and its enterprises in which the efforts and passions of each are absorbed and depersonalized, is another community, the community that demands that the one who has his own communal identity, who produces his own nature, expose himself to the one with whom he has nothing in common, the stranger. This other community is not simply absorbed into the rational community; it recurs, it troubles the rational community, as its double or its shadow. This other community forms not in a work, but in the interruption of work and enterprises. It is not realized in having or in producing something in common but in exposing oneself to the one with whom one has nothing in common (Lingis, 1994, p. 10).

With regard to this view on community, education is not about facilitating the process of producing a joint identity or a common we, as suggested by various protagonists of social cohesion and social capital theorists. Nor is it aimed at including people in homogeneous communities. Often, such attempts are counterproductive and end up with exclusion rather than inclusion (Arneil, 2006). On the contrary, in this view education could be conceived as creating conditions in which people's identities are interrupted by the presence of others who articulate other opinions, or different expressions of what life and living together is about. A *pedagogy of interruption* is a pedagogy that *violates* the sovereignty of the subject by asking the simple but fundamental question: what do you think about this, where do you stand on this, or, how will you respond? (Biesta, 2006, p. 150) In line with this view adult and community education is a matter of creating public or worldly spaces where the issues that torment us can be debated, *without* the certainty that what we are saying is the ultimate right answer, but *with* the certainty that we are thus preserving the difference and keeping democracy alive.

We are aware of the fact that research in adult and continuing education that deals with issues of community building often relates to the dominant orientation of restoring social cohesion through the increase of social capital. Yet, other approaches favour a position where the experience of interruption of the common (sense) has a central educative meaning. We have invited contributors to develop a stance vis-à-vis these two

divergent orientations regarding adult education and community building. We can classify the responses that we received from contributors to this thematic issue more or less along these two perspectives on the relationship between adult education and community building. The contributions can neatly be divided into two sets of three papers. The first three papers presented in this volume concentrate directly or indirectly on different aspects of social cohesion, focusing on gamers' associations in Swedish society, cross-border identity building in Spain and Portugal and the educative dimension of motor clubs in Australia. The reader will probably also notice that these papers present a rather sociological perspective on education and learning practices. The other three papers focus on education as a form of interruption of familiar perspectives of participants in participatory practices. They include a paper on international learning communities in Poland, one presenting diverse views on citizenship, community and participation and, finally, a paper on a health education experiment in Northern Ireland. It is clear that all papers in this issue mainly deal with contexts of non-formal and sometimes informal education and learning. Apart from the Australian paper on community building and motor sports, all contributions in this special issue refer to practices developed in Europe, covering perspectives from the North to the South of the continent. Let us now go a bit deeper into the specific contribution of each selected paper to the reflection on 'adult education and the community' as presented in this introduction.

The paper on 'Learning democracy in Swedish gamers' associations' by Tobias Harding presents the development of SVEROK, an association uniting some 100.000 gamers, organised in local communities throughout the country and represented democratically on the national level. The central argument in Harding's contribution is that members of the association that take leadership responsibilities also learn a lot from participating in structures and practices of representative democracy. Learning from organized teaching (*episteme*) appears to play a very limited role in SVEROK. Learning among those active in the organization is dominated by learning via experience, and can thus be characterized as either *phronēsis* or *technē*. The experiential knowledge gained by activity in SVEROK is likely to strengthen their ability to act in a representative democracy, and also as organizational entrepreneurs in other contexts. This contribution confirms that, in spite of the often alarming messages about the disintegration of civil society, associative life is enriched by new organizations combining applications of new technologies with fairly traditional forms of democratic representation.

The paper 'Learning contexts of 'the Others': Identity building processes in southern Europe', by Estrella Gualda et al, is about the construction of identities in a cross-border region divided by the river Guadiana at the frontier between Spain and Portugal. The paper, based on interviews with local inhabitants and educationalists shows that on both sides of the border, the tendency to construct local identities is still very much alive, in spite of the dynamics of Europeanisation and globalisation. These identities are mainly constructed through narratives about one's own community in contrast with 'the other' community, living across the river. Often, these constructions are informed by stereotypes that have a long-standing history. The fieldwork also uncovered the common idea that the border represented by the river Guadiana is real and separates two different countries that are two historically dissimilar empires that treasure different languages and, despite being neighbours, live largely back-to-back. It is quite obvious that well intentioned educational practices aimed at stimulating openness towards 'the other' have to take into account the perseverance of narratives constructing the imagined communities of the different nation states in Europe, a

tendency which seems to be strengthened again by the recent insecurities of the financial crisis.

The paper 'Not just petrol heads: Men's learning in the community through participation in motor sports', by Barry Golding analyses the commitment of members of these communities in terms of learning processes. It obviously is situated in the theoretical tradition of 'situated learning' and 'communities of practice' developed by Lave and Wenger (1991), and in line with social capital theories mentioned above. The paper reminds us of the reality that a wide variety of the learning of adults takes place in practices that do not have 'education' as their primary objective. The participation as such supports the members to acquire competences needed to participate in the club, to achieve good results in the competition, to keep their vehicle in good shape. Furthermore, participation in these motor sports organisations enabled men from diverse backgrounds, who shared a similar social and cultural interest in machines, to exercise agency and become active producers of that culture rather than its passive consumers. In actively constructing this motor-cyclist culture, homogeneity rather than diversity within the community is a central perspective. As such these communities definitely depend on and contribute to the development of social capital, since they both require and enhance trust, shared norms and reciprocity.

As mentioned before, the next three papers focus more on the disjunctive processes that often occur in participatory educational practices. The first paper in this series is written by Hana Cervinkova and deals with 'International learning communities for global and local citizenship'. It describes and analyzes an action research project in Wroclaw (Poland), whereby American, Ukrainian and Polish students participate in what is called 'an urban laboratory'. The participants of the programme that lasts a month get acquainted with the geography, the history, the culture and the economy of the city and are invited to develop a tour for tourists in line with a particular topic they have selected and studied in dialogue with others. The research, which is presented as a participatory action research project using ethnographic methods, describes the laboratory as an interruption for most of the students' conventional understanding of European cities, cultures and histories. It also reveals to them how the local is connected to the global and vice versa. As a result, the author emphasizes the continued relevance of critical community and action-inspired pedagogy, strongly grounded in local work and aimed at helping people learn and act in an increasingly disempowering world, regardless of their culture of origin or that of their current or future residence.

The next paper by Joke Vandenabeele et al, named 'Diverse views on citizenship, community and participation: Exploring the role of adult education and practice' is conceptual in the first place. With the help of three photographs (re)presenting 'bodies in action', the authors explore how differentially we can conceive of and perceive activities of participatory citizenship. Three different types of citizens are presented and analyzed: the participating citizen, the relational citizen and the indefinite citizen. The first one is the most 'classical' one that is often presented as the ideal 'active citizen' both by policy makers and community organisations. This citizen is well qualified to operate in the rational community mentioned above and learns to acquire the competences needed through participatory actions (see also the Swedish example of the Gamers' Associations). The second one, the relational citizen, can be situated more in the context of the 'community of those who have nothing in common'. The relational citizen gives a singularized response to experiences of 'otherness' that tend to interrupt the taken-for-granted answers that membership in the rational community makes available. The 'indefinite citizen' is the resident of the city, the anonymous inhabitant whom we don't know, and yet, whom we create a community with through everyday

ephemeral encounters. While interrupting the traditional concept of the 'active or participating' citizen, the authors make a plea for what they describe as a methodology of discomfort. It is a methodology that is attentive to the irreducible 'otherness' of many of the spaces and sites of citizenship practices that are outside the walls of formal educational institutions.

The last paper, 'Paradoxes unbounded. Practising community making', is written by Tess Maginess. It reports on a concrete experience of action research in Northern Ireland, where a researcher/educator invited a group of local men to engage in a process of video-production, problematising the health conditions within their community. The researcher experiments with an alternative approach since adult men often are reluctant to discuss private matters in educational encounters. The video-production seems to be a valuable research alternative and leads the author to reflect on the two approaches to community that we introduced earlier in this introductory paper. She refers to them as 'the community of similitude' and 'the community of difference' and suggests a third way (a third life) and a community-in-practice as a metaphor that negotiates both ideals. The author argues for a concept of community that is unafraid of un-making and remaking itself. This concept, she says, accepts the need for similitude and shared values not as a recidivist retreat to a pastoral idyll, but as a forward looking, sceptical and creative process which is capable of operating with contradictions, otherness and diversity. Its common, community aim is that of tackling inequality within itself, rather than being concerned with protecting itself. The six contributions which are a response to our invitation to reflect on 'adult education and the community' together present a rich variety of educational practices, of research methodologies and observations, of different paradigms of looking at citizenship, community and participation. We hope this diversity will inspire the reader and invite him or her to contribute to the ongoing discussion on the role and positioning of adult education in present day society.

## References

- Amin, A. (2005). Local Community on Trial. *Economy and Society*, 34(4), 612-633.
- Arneil, B. (2006). *Diverse Communities. The Problem with Social Capital*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Biesta, G. (2006). *Beyond Learning. Democratic Education for a Human Future*. Boulder: Paradigm.
- Field, J. (2003). *Social Capital*. London: Routledge.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lingis, A. (1994). *The Community of Those who Have Nothing in Common*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Mouffe, C. (2005). *On the Political*. London: Routledge.
- Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling Alone. The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Scheffer, P. (2007). *Het land van aankomst*. Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij.